

THE EARLY TURNPIKES OF THE SUSQUEHANNA VALLEY

BY RICHMOND E. MYERS*

WITH the growing importance of turnpike travel today, and with rumors of turnpike extensions almost daily newspaper items, it might be well to turn our attention to the turnpikes of the Susquehanna Valley, which were, in fact, the forerunners of our modern express highways.

Early land transportation in the Susquehanna Valley was simple. It consisted of hauling goods to and from the banks of the river, and was done by hand or with the aid of draught animals. This, of course, was purely local and of no major significance in the economic growth of the valley. Not until the general development of passable roads made possible the hauling of goods by wagon, did any form of vehicular transportation play a role of importance in servicing the transportation needs of the Valley.

The first roads that penetrated the Valley on which vehicles could be moved conveniently were the turnpikes. These were hard surfaced, all-weather roads, built and maintained by chartered companies through the sale of stock and the collection of toll. At times the state subsidized turnpikes by the purchase of large blocks of stock, but it is significant that, at the time these roads were built, it was not expected that the state would supply free roads through taxation.¹ The turnpike was an accepted institution, and for the most part, tolls were willingly paid by all who made use of such highways.

The era of turnpike building reached roughly from 1790 to 1840. Many of these highways were of purely local significance, but others were a part of an integrated system of roadways, planned when the subject of internal improvements was not only statewide

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¹ Oliphant, J. O., and Linn, M. W., "The Lewisburg and Mifflinburg Turnpike Company," *Pennsylvania History*, Vol. XV, No. 2, April, 1948, p. 86.



OLD TOLL GATE

On the Cumberland Turnpike west of Harrisburg. This was one of the last turnpikes to operate in Pennsylvania prior to the present turnpike era.

Courtesy Pennsylvania Department of Highways

but also of national interest. These turnpikes reflected the rivalry between the port cities of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore for the trade of the "New West" that was rising on the far side of the Appalachians.

The turnpike era was short. It reached its peak around 1830. By 1832 Pennsylvania, leading all other states in turnpike construction, had chartered 220 companies which had built 3,000 miles of road at a cost of \$8,000,000.² By 1840 the building of turnpikes had ceased as attention was diverted to canals and railroads, both of which were far better able to serve the Valley than even the best toll highways.

Not all of the above miles of road were in the Susquehanna Valley. The turnpikes that served the Susquehanna country accounted for about only 10 per cent of the total mileage of New York and Pennsylvania combined,³ and can be put into two categories: (1) two through routes to the west which merely crossed the river, and (2) feeder roads, which tapped the valley

² Dunaway, W. F., *History of Pennsylvania* (N. Y., 1935), pp. 670-671.

³ Livingood, J. W., *Philadelphia and Baltimore Trade Rivalry* (Harrisburg, 1947), p. 53.

at certain points for the purpose of diverting river traffic to either New York, Philadelphia, or Baltimore. It is significant to note that no turnpike, with the exception of one between Middletown and Harrisburg, followed the river.

Turnpikes were not the first roads in the Susquehanna Valley. The early settlers had relied on roads to supplement the river in reaching markets, as the fertile soils of the colony and the friendly Indian policies of the Penns enabled the farmers to produce surplus products. By 1770 eight main roads crossed the Pennsylvania-Maryland border west of the Susquehanna River,⁴ connecting Baltimore with the farms of York and Adams County. East of the river, roads connected Middletown with Lancaster, and Lancaster with Philadelphia. Another road connected Lancaster with Wright's Ferry (Columbia).⁵ All of these roads, however, were poor in the best of weather and impassable at other times. A Middletown miller in 1793 wrote the following about the road leading towards Philadelphia: ". . . large quantities of wheat and other produce, and flour manufactured here, and which are to be forwarded by land, remain on hand for want of teams which are terrified by the bad and dangerous roads over the Connowago and other hills. This occasions that such produce will often come too late to market."⁶

The responsibility for constructing and servicing these roads was in the hands of local authorities, who did little or nothing about it. They had neither the funds nor the technical knowledge necessary to build and repair all-weather highways; so until after the Revolution few improvements were made.

In 1791 the Society for Promoting the Improvement of Roads and Inland Navigation in Pennsylvania endorsed a plan for road improvements. Governor Mifflin the same year stated: "The want of a good and permanent road is at present the principal defect in communication between the middle counties and the metropolis."⁷

A special commission was appointed. It made a hurried study

⁴ Turner, M. K., "The Commercial Relations of the Susquehanna Valley during the Colonial Period," unpublished thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1916, p. 75.

⁵ Adlum & Wallis, *Map of the Roads and Inland Navigation of Pennsylvania and Adjacent States* (Philadelphia, 1792).

⁶ Livingood, J. W., *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁷ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4 Ser., IV, p. 198.

of the situation, and reported that a turnpike between Lancaster and Philadelphia would be a worthwhile investment. The report also stated that the tremendous amount of traffic then moving between the two cities would be unable to continue unless an artificial road were constructed.⁸

On April 9, 1792, the act enabling the governor to incorporate "a company for making an artificial road from the City of Philadelphia to the Borough of Lancaster" was passed. The preamble to the act began :

Whereas, the great quantity of heavy articles of the growth and produce of the country, and of foreign goods which are daily transported between the City of Philadelphia and the Western counties of the State, requires an amendment of the highway which can only be affected by artificial beds of stone and gravel disposed of in such a manner as to prevent the wheels from cutting into the soil; and it is reasonable that those who enjoy the benefits of such a highway should pay a compensation, . . .⁹

In these words we see the feeling of that time regarding roads: Let those who travel pay. We also see the trade involved: "Produce of the country—foreign goods—daily transported between the City of Philadelphia, and the western counties." These words are ample proof of a major trade movement.

The turnpike company was organized. Stock was sold and over-subscribed almost immediately. The turnpike was completed in 1794. The road was well made. It was paved with stone the whole way and topped with gravel.¹⁰ This treatment was the first to make a road fit for very extensive wagon use in America. Very quickly the traffic from the Susquehanna Valley began to move eastward over the turnpike and a traveler reported that, "It was scarcely possible to go one mile on the road without meeting numbers of wagons passing and repassing between the back parts of the state and Philadelphia."¹¹

⁸ Landis, C. I., "The First Long Turnpike in the United States," Lancaster County Historical Society Publication, Vol. XXII, 1916, p. 16.

⁹ *American State Papers*, Miscellaneous, I, pp. 894-897.

¹⁰ Bailey, J., *Journal of a Tour in the Unsettled Parts of North America, 1796-1797* (Phila., 1798), p. 107.

¹¹ Weld, Isaac J., *Travels Through the States of North America and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, from 1795-1797* (London, 1799), Vol. I, p. 107.

Until the completion of the Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad, the company did a thriving business. The prosperity of the turnpike was nationally known. It should have been, for, until the turnpike was finally reduced to local traffic by rail competition, its dividends were unusually high, in spite of the fact that large sums were literally put back into the road to keep it in repair.

The success of this turnpike called for its extension to the Susquehanna River, but this portion of the road was not ready for traffic until 1803. When opened, the extension (known as the Lancaster & Susquehanna Turnpike) was soon carrying its heavy load of traffic, and in a few years was paying dividends to its stockholders amounting to about 5½ per cent.¹²

Several important turnpikes were serving the east side of the lower Susquehanna Valley by 1820. These were the Lancaster-Elizabethtown-Middletown, Middletown-Harrisburg, and the Berks & Dauphin Turnpikes. They were built largely by Philadelphia interests to divert from Baltimore markets trade coming down the river. Baltimore in turn was a heavy backer of turnpikes leading north from the Chesapeake into York and Adams Counties.

Philadelphia interests also sought to tap the river trade much farther upstream. The Center Turnpike connecting Reading with Sunbury was opened in 1812. A plan was projected to tap the trade of the extreme northern part of the Susquehanna Basin into Philadelphia over two turnpikes, one from a point on the upper Lehigh River to Nescopeck on the Susquehanna (the Susquehanna & Lehigh Turnpike), the other from Nescopeck north across the plateau to Elmira, N. Y. (the Susquehanna & Tioga Turnpike). The lower turnpike was opened in 1806, the northern road not until 1825.

Turnpikes were also built between points on the Delaware River and points on the upper Susquehanna. One connected Easton with Wilkes-Barre, another Milford with Owego, N. Y., and a third, Cochection with Great Bend. Another was planned, but never built, to connect Philadelphia with Great Bend. Each of these roads was intended to tap the upper Susquehanna Valley trade into Philadelphia via the Delaware Valley, and thus effectively divert it from Baltimore.

¹² *Pennsylvania State Senate Journal*, 1821-1822, Reports on Roads, Bridges, and Canals.

Rates of Toll on the Cumberland Road in Pennsylvania.

Every score of sheep	6'
" " Hogs	5'
" " Cattle	12'
" Horse and rider	4'
Every led or drove horse, Mule or Ass	3'
" Sled or sleigh drawn by one horse or pair of oxen	3'
" Horse or pair of oxen in addition	3'
" Dearborn, Sulky, Chair or Chaise with one horse	6'
" Horse in addition	3'
Every Chariot, Coach, Coachee, Stage, Phaeton or Chaise with two horses and four wheels	12'
" Horse in addition	3'
Every other carriage of pleasure by whatever name it may be called, the same according to the number of wheels and horses drawing the same	
Every cart or wagon, whose wheels do not exceed three inches in breadth, drawn by one horse or pair of oxen	4'
" Horse in addition	3'
Every cart or wagon whose wheels exceed three inches and does not exceed four inches in breadth, for every horse or pair of oxen drawing the same	4'
Every cart or wagon whose wheels exceed four inches, and do not exceed six inches in breadth, for every horse or pair of oxen drawing the same	3'
Every cart or wagon whose wheels exceed six inches and do not exceed eight inches in breadth, for every horse drawing the same	2'
All carts or wagons whose wheels exceed eight inches in breadth	FREE
Any person refusing or neglecting to pay toll a fine of	

BOARD POSTING RATES OF TOLL

On old Cumberland Turnpike.

Courtesy Pennsylvania Department of Highways

New York City tried to draw off some of this commerce by building the Catskill Turnpike, linking the upper Susquehanna Valley with that of the Hudson. This road, opened in 1812, may have diverted some of the trade from the headwater region of the Susquehanna, and thus pared down the size of the hinterland for which both Philadelphia and Baltimore contended;¹³ but with no available statistics it is impossible to say to what extent this was the case.

On the west side of the Susquehanna a number of important but unimproved roads led westward, even in colonial days. Frontier trade utilized these roads, but their impassable conditions rendered them unfit much of the time. By 1770 Baltimore had become the hub for many public highways, several of which led north as far as the Pennsylvania line, and the York-Adams County region beyond.¹⁴ These roads were used by Pennsylvania farmers to service Baltimore markets. In 1789 there were not enough wagons available to carry the trade between Shippensburg and Baltimore.¹⁵ These Maryland roads were a failure, however, because of political mismanagement. In 1804 and 1805 the Maryland Legislature authorized the organization of turnpike companies to maintain the roads then in operation by the state, and to build additional turnpikes. Pennsylvania encouraged this move by incorporating companies to extend these roads north into the Cumberland and Susquehanna Valleys. Until the opening of the Susquehanna & Tidewater Canal, and the railroad north from Baltimore into central Pennsylvania, these turnpikes did exceedingly well.

At this point it might be well to examine very briefly the Susquehanna trade which turnpikes were expected to tap from the river and deliver to the markets of their respective backers. The best way to do this is to quote from a few contemporary sources. From time to time references to the river trade appeared in print. For example, on May 23, 1801, the Lancaster *Journal* ran this item:

A correspondent is happy in his power to inform the

¹³ Flick, A. C., *History of New York State* (N. Y., 1933), Vol. V, p. 265.

¹⁴ Sioussat, St. George, "Highway Legislation in Maryland and its Influence on the Economic Development of the State," *Maryland Geological Survey*, Pub. III, 1889, p. 144.

¹⁵ "Journal of John May of Boston," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XLV, p. 109.

citizens of Baltimore that within the last fortnight not less than 75 arks have arrived at tidewater from up the Susquehanna, well loaded with flour, wheat, bar-iron and such, not worth less than \$150,000.

It may be added that at this time there are at Columbia and Middletown no less than 50,000 bu. of wheat and 15,000 bbls. of flour, which if navigation were safe would be at this market.

Under the date of July 9, 1814, *Niles Register* informs us :

20,000 bbls. of salt have been brought down the river from the salt works. The people in this part of the country are also benefited by great quantities of plaster which is also brought down the river.

The same publication, May 3, 1817, reported :

In the first twelve days of April, \$100,000. worth of property was sent down the river to market from the village of Owego, N. Y. It consisted largely of boats laden with Plaster of Paris and rafts of timber and board.

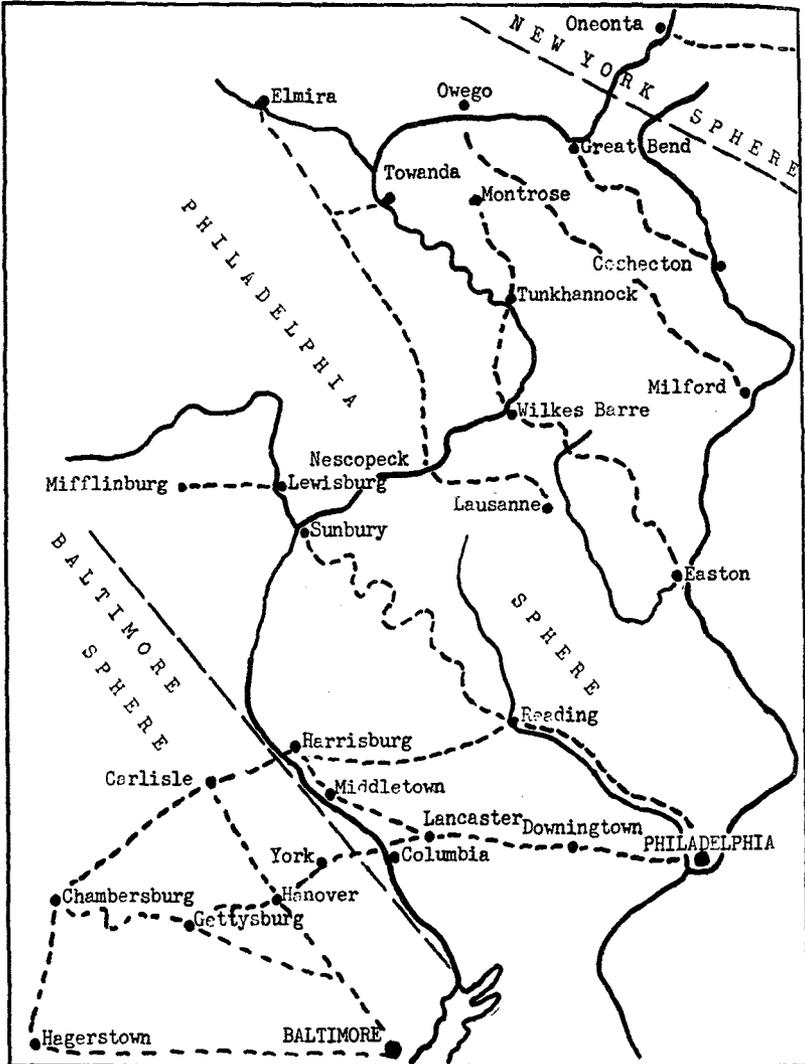
Several issues later (July 12, 1817), the editor stated that between March 29 and July 1, 261 boats carried 94,500 bushels of wheat and 83,200 barrels of iron to tidewater.

The *Susquehanna Register of Arks, Rafts, etc.*, for the year 1822, reported the following goods as having come down the river to Port Deposit and been trans-shipped from there to Baltimore: flour, wheat, whiskey, clover seed, lard, calfskins, corn, flax seed, tallow, pork, beef, rye, potatoes, potash, buckwheat, and tobacco. Besides farm products it listed coal, slate, pots, and bake ovens. The total value of these products was given at \$1,121,000.

Turning again to *Niles Register*, from the issue dated June 30, 1827, we learn that between February and June of that year, 1,370 arks and 300 keelboats passed down the river to the bay. Their cargo was estimated to consist of 11,000 tons of coal, 468,000 barrels of flour, and "considerable" whiskey. In 1828 Niles estimated that the whole bulk of Susquehanna commerce was 200,000 tons.

All these figures are, of course, fragmentary. No complete or

even adequate statistical data are available on the actual values of the total commerce that came down the river during the boom days of turnpike building in the valley. However, from the data that do exist it is not unreasonable to conclude that the river trade was well worth fighting for.



A MAP OF THE TURNPIKES

In the Susquehanna Valley and adjacent areas at the height of the turnpike days, about 1830.

The pattern of turnpikes in the Susquehanna Valley was significant. A careful analysis of their distribution will reveal certain basic situations (see map). The first of these was the division of the valley into very definite spheres of influence. These show up quite clearly in the turnpike picture because, for the most part, these roads were rendering local (within the Susquehanna Valley) service only.

As shown on the map, Philadelphia dominated the northern and eastern sections of the valley, while Baltimore was the center of commerce on the western side of the river. This division was recognized officially as early as 1791, when, in his annual message for that year, Governor Mifflin stated:

. . . the circumstances of our inland trade, will probably suggest the idea, of making a reasonable compensation to the holders of certain ferries on the Susquehanna, and other rivers, in order to give free passage to waggons transporting produce to the market, and returning with the merchandise, of Philadelphia. This, it has been conceived, would be the means of preventing trade from several counties from centering in other states, as experience has shewn, that when the Susquehanna is frozen over, many farmers convey their produce to this city, which in other seasons, they dispose of in Maryland.¹⁶

The second basic situation is not so obvious from the map. This was the purely local importance of most of the turnpikes. Even the longest highways carried much traffic that was between towns on the road rather than between terminal points. These highways serviced farming areas by providing a road over which the farmer could haul his produce to market, and that market was commonly the nearest town. After the advent of canals and railroads some turnpikes continued to render this service for many years. Several continued to function until well into the present century. The paying of toll on the old New Holland Turnpike is well within the memory of many who read these lines.

One reason why the turnpikes remained essentially local roads was the physiographic barrier of the Allegheny Mountains. Their topography hindered the construction of all-weather roads suitable

¹⁶ *Pennsylvania Archives*, 4 Ser., IV, 198.

to carry the heavy traffic that a road leading west over the mountains would surely have had. The failure of the Susquehanna Valley turnpikes to penetrate the western part of Pennsylvania, prevented any of them from becoming a through artery of commerce, and held their haulage essentially to local levels.

The third basic situation that appeared in the turnpike picture was the failure of these highways to service any one particular manufacturing or extractive industry in the valley. There were a number of reasons why this was the case. Perhaps the most important was the physical limitations placed on the amount and weight of cargo hauled by wagon. One flatboat could transport twenty tons of coal,¹⁷ and a canal boat even more. A train of railway cars could do even better. To overcome the limitations on cargo transported by wagon, the famous Conestoga Wagon was designed in Lancaster County. It could carry 3,000 pounds of goods. Such a load, in turn, required draught animals of exceptional strength. A special breed of horses was developed to pull the heavy loads,¹⁸ but all to no avail. The great freight wagon was not equal to the task of transporting in bulk such goods as lumber or coal. It was therefore unable to service the heavy industries of the Susquehanna Valley in their years of early growth.

Another reason why turnpikes failed to service any particular industry was that by the time the mines and factories of the valley had developed to a point where they might have welcomed good highways, the canals and railroads had moved into the picture and were taking over the functions that the turnpikes might have performed. The new modes of transportation were able to haul greater quantities and heavier goods, do it more quickly, and for less money. That is why the turnpike era ended abruptly.

In closing it is of interest to note the reversal of trends today. Turnpikes are returning, mile after mile, only this time not as local highways but as through expressways. The canals in the Susquehanna Valley are ruins and memories. The railways are suffering from competition of carriers hauling goods over highways. One final and ironical thought: the success of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, which today crosses the Susquehanna River at High-

¹⁷ MacGill, C. E., and collaborators, *History of Transportation in the United States before 1860* (Washington, 1917), p. 189.

¹⁸ Beck, Herbert, "Conestoga Horse, Pioneer in Pennsylvania Transportation," *Pennsylvania Department of Internal Affairs Bulletin*, July, 1941, p. 6.

spire, is due in part to the fact that it succeeded where its last century forerunners failed. It pierced the Allegheny barrier, thus gaining access to Pittsburgh and the west. It achieved this end by means of tunnels originally planned to lead a railroad through the mountains, and in this manner it has provided the impetus to swing the pendulum in the other direction. Turnpikes are with us again, and in all probability they are here to stay.



THE PENNSYLVANIA TURNPIKE, 1954

Successor to the Cumberland Turnpike. This scene is in the Cumberland Valley, not far from the Old Toll Gate shown on page 249.

Courtesy Pennsylvania Department of Highways

NOTIFICATION TO MEMBERS

Proposed Change in the Constitution of the Association

At the Council Meeting of the Association on October 23, 1953, it was moved, seconded, and passed to amend Section II, Article 5, of the Constitution to read: "The life membership fee shall be one hundred dollars, payable in advance."

The signers of the proposed amendment are J. O. Oliphant, J. A. Barnes, R. N. Williams, P. S. Klein, W. A. Russ.